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## In Search of a Synthesis: Reflections on Two Interpretations of Edvard Radzinskii's *Lunin* or the Death of Jacques, Recorded in the Presence of the Master

### Abstract

This article examines the contemporary Soviet dramatist Edward Radzinskii's *Lunin*, the second play in the author's "historical-philosophical trilogy" [*Conversations with Socrates* (1969), *Lunin* (1979), and *Theater at the Time of Nero and Seneca* (1981)]. All three dramas address the relationship between the intellectual and authority. As a philosophical play and as part of the trilogy, *Lunin* raises universal ethical questions: the banality of power, the paranoia of ideological dogmatists, the fate of the individual who refuses to compromise in the face of a system which will not tolerate any denial of its authority. As an historical play, *Lunin* is set in a specific historical context. Its protagonist, the Decembrist M.S. Lunin, confronts the Russian autocracy, a tyranny that seeks its legitimacy not in custom or law but in rationality itself and is unchecked by God or man. The composition of this drama and its imagery make it unusually theatrical. The article examines the interpretations of this drama presented in both Soviet and American productions of the play and considers the tension between the philosophical and historical dimensions of the drama evident in these productions. The author concludes that in seeking to exploit the theatrical potential of this play, a production, while taking into account the nature of its audience, should not lose sight of either its philosophical or historical meaning.

### Keywords

Edward Radzinskii, Soviet dramatist, Russian drama, Soviet drama, Lunin, historical-philosophical trilogy, *Conversations with Socrates*, *Theatre at the Time of Nero and Seneca*, intellectual, authority, relationship, philosophy, Soviet productions, American productions, comparative, historical

In Search of a Synthesis: Reflections on Two Interpretations  
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In 1979 the attention of the Moscow theater-goers was drawn to posters announcing the premiere of a new play by Edvard Radzinskii at the popular Theater on *Malaia Bronnaia*. The title of the play, *Lunin or the Death of Jacques, Recorded in the Presence of the Master*, was unusual and intriguing enough. As to the author, Radzinskii's reputation as a stimulating and original playwright had been established long since. Over the past decade and a half his work has held many surprises for his admirers: *The Seducer Kolobashkin* (1968), a play exploring the Faust-Mephistopheles relationship in the context of contemporary Soviet society; *Conversations with Socrates* (1975), a philosophical drama which focused upon the eternal dilemmas of the intellectual confronting authority and upon the question of a teacher's exploration of moral issues becoming dogma in the hands of his followers; *Don Juan Continued* (1979), a tragedy of the alienated man in the twentieth century and his dying legends; and finally the enigmatic *Lunin*.

Theaters in the Soviet Union are never empty. For some productions tickets are almost impossible to get unless one has "connections" or one is willing to spend a night outside waiting for the box-office to open. Such was the case with this new play by Radzinskii. On the opening night the auditorium was more than full. The restlessness in the hall hinted at the audience's high expectations. Finally the last bell rang. The lights dimmed to total darkness. Then a dry cough and a short dry laugh broke the silence. Someone on the stage lit a candle. A voice began to speak, and as the eyes of the spectators became accustomed to the feeble light, they made out the obscure figure of an old man holding a candle-stick in his hand. The man moved about the

stage, and the flickering light of the taper revealed the interior of a prison cell, and in the depth of the cell the glittering golden embroidery and epaulets of the military were illuminated. Still further in the background, a woman in black extended her arms as if trying to break out of the darkness to touch the old man. The old man was Lunin.

The audience knew this immediately. What they were not aware of, however, was that they had already been introduced to the character and his setting by a theatrical device: moving about his cell, the old man had read the introductory stage directions. The effect was quite striking. By thus fusing different levels of reality, the author achieved several things. First, he offered the audience a complete and highly satisfying experience of the play as theater, as life, and as a work of literature. Second, he provided them with the key to understanding the play's leading character, at once the creator of, a participant in, and an observer of his own drama. Finally, he involved the spectators in this drama as witnesses to history, to a living past, which shaped and continued to shape their own world. For this play is, indeed, an historical drama in which we witness the death, or rather murder, of one of the most enigmatic figures in Russian history, the Decembrist, Mikhail Sergeevich Lunin (1787–1845).

For Radzinskii and his audience Lunin and the Decembrists were not obscure historical figures. Decembrism occupies a particular and contradictory place in the consciousness of the Russian intelligentsia. Like the Roman god Janus, Decembrism faced in two directions in politics and culture. Politically, the “men of 1825” when addressing the means of transforming the autocratic order looked backward towards a tradition of palace coups and Guards’ revolts which had become an ingrained part of the Russian gentry’s civic life in the eighteenth century. With regard to their ends, as men shaped by the values of the Enlightenment and their sense of civic duty, which was forged during the struggle against Napoleon, they embraced a program that ranged from the liberal to the radical, reflecting the diversity of opinion within their ranks. Whether supporters of a constitutional monarchy or a republic, they were agreed on the need to put an end to the autocracy and abolish serfdom. Culturally, the Decembrists, among them poets and dramatists, who made a contribution to Russian letters, drew their inspiration from the civic-satirical verse of the eighteenth century, particularly that of Derzhavin, and from the Romanticism represented by V. A. Zhukovskii, with its emphasis upon the nobility of spirit.

In political and cultural terms the immediate achievements of the Decembrists were modest. Their preparations for the *coup d'état* of December 14, 1825, were comically inadequate, and their disagreement on a political program was both divisive and self-defeating. Theirs was a revolt in the name of freedom and the people. Yet, they distrusted the great uneducated and oppressed majority of the nation, the enserfed peasantry, whose involvement they feared might lead to a bloodbath, i.e. like the *Pugachevshchina* which had rocked Russia during the reign of Catherine the Great. The carnage that Pugachev had unleashed against the gentry had shocked and horrified that estate from which the Decembrists came. Governesses threatened their young charges when they were disobedient with Pugachev a generation later.

Decembrism created its own myth, which proved much more powerful than its actual accomplishments. Within a generation, young men, whose parents had denounced the conspirators as apostates to their estates, swore oaths to the "martyrs of July 13," the five Decembrists executed by Nicholas I. Denounced by the government, scorned by the gentry, and misunderstood by the other estates of Russia, the Decembrists became the property of the intelligentsia.<sup>1</sup>

Possessing the Decembrists created its own dilemma for the intelligentsia. The political divisions within the movement between reformers and radicals, as symbolized by the conflicting views of Nikita Murav'ev and Pavel Pestel, provided a bench mark for the degree of alienation which the generation of the 1830s and 1840s felt towards the *Nikolaevshchina*, the very embodiment of an obscurantist autocratic order against which Decembrism had struggled. Both radical and reformist strains of thought, whether Slavophile or Western in sympathy, evinced a tendency towards a secular theodicy in treating the Decembrists' martyrdom.<sup>2</sup> Each sought in the rationality of history some larger meaning in the suffering of those whom Nicholas I had labeled "my friends of the fourteenth" and had sent to the scaffolds or hard labor and exile in Siberia. Alexander Pushkin's "Deep in the Siberian Mines" (*Vo glubine sibirskikh rud*), written in 1827, had called upon freedom to knock down the walls and give his brothers the sword. A generation later, the exiled Alexander Herzen chose as the mast for his *Polar Star* the images of the five who had been hanged but proclaimed them to be "the five who were crucified." To his generation Herzen presented the Decembrists as models of civic virtue against which to measure the

“superfluous men.” Their suffering became the suffering of all of Russia. The iron hoop around Pestel’s head became a metaphor for the chains that the autocracy imposed upon the entire country (Herzen, IV, p. 1577).<sup>3</sup> Surely their Golgotha must lead through their tomb to a national resurrection.

This theodicy allowed members of the intelligentsia to ignore the more morally ambiguous aspects of the Decembrists’ movement: the plans for regicide, the Machiavellian machinations of Pestel, the premeditated murder of General Miloradovich, and the confessions and betrayals under interrogations by such figures as the “dictator,” Prince S. P. Trubetskoi.<sup>4</sup> Instead, later generations of the intelligentsia concentrated upon the Decembrists’ civic virtue, dedication, Russian nationalism. One figure who fit well within this framework was Mikhail Sergeevich Lunin, hero of Austerlitz, colonel of the Guards, one of the founders of the Union of Salvation, and the first among the Decembrists to propose regicide. Involved in both the Northern and Southern Societies, Lunin did not, however, take a direct role in the events of December 14. Arrested in Warsaw, when incriminating evidence emerged during the investigation of the conspiracy, Lunin refused to denounce his connections with the various societies or to betray his friends. He went into Siberian exile and there continued to uphold the ideals of Decembrism and to develop his own thoughts on the struggle against autocracy. There he engaged in the dissemination of illegal tracts, a form of *samizdat*, critical of the *Nikolaevshchina* (Lunin 40).<sup>5</sup> The authorities discovered these activities in 1843, and Lunin was again arrested and sent to the mining village of Akatui where he died under mysterious circumstances in late 1845.<sup>6</sup>

In Lunin’s life before and after December 14 the problems associated with this secular theodicy stand in stark relief. Is he to be seen as one of the prophets of a successful new orthodoxy whose priests claim to have smashed the tsarist state and carried Russia into a new era under the banner of historical inevitability? Or does he belong to the ranks of the “jesters,” to whom the very idea of orthodoxy and dogma are anathema? Leszek Kolakowski, the Polish philosopher and critic of Marxism-Leninism, has defined as a jester one “who questions what appears to be self-evident.”<sup>7</sup> Such jesters can, as in the case of the *philosophes*, shake the very foundations of society. For them the idea of a catechism is totally alien and can only be treated with mockery. So long as the Decembrists were dealt with within the

framework of a secular theodicy, the intellectual and moral dimensions of their actions, and those of Lunin in particular, could be ignored against the sweep of history.

And yet, their moral and ethical dilemmas took on greater meaning to an intelligentsia, confronted by the tragic realities of the twentieth century, when the full measure of actions “for the good of the cause” had become terribly apparent. Drama has served as a forum for that re-examination in the post-Stalin era of the moral and ethical dilemmas confronting the Decembrists. In *The Decembrists*, one of the trilogy of plays produced in 1967 by the *Sovremennik* Theater to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, L. Zorin explores the relationship between personal morality and civic good. He leaves the audience with a sense of moral uneasiness, uncertain of the legitimacy of terror as a political weapon (Kuhlke 7).

Twelve years later, another playwright, Edvard Radzinskii, once more has drawn the attention of the intelligentsia to the Decembrist movement and its legacies. He too re-examines its moral dimensions but looks at them from an entirely new perspective. In his play, *Lunin*, Radzinskii is concerned primarily with the causes and consequences of the movement’s failure. The playwright has chosen to make Lunin’s single crime, his willingness to commit regicide, entirely meaningless. The very lack of distinction which Radzinskii asserts among the three manifestations of the Tsar’s uniform—Alexander, Constantine, Nicholas—makes it clear that this existential act had no and could have no political meaning. In this Radzinskii censors the entire generation of the Decembrists—men who not only could not act in any meaningful way against their oppressors but were too much the slaves even to avoid collaborating in their own trials and investigations.

While rejecting Decembrism as a movement, Radzinskii attaches great meaning to Lunin’s personal struggle. It is precisely this struggle that becomes the play’s central theme. Mikhail Sergeevich Lunin enters battle with the autocracy on equal terms—as a free man—and wins. His struggle is not a coherent political program, but rather the assertion of his personal emancipation from both the autocratic regime of Nicholas I and the seductive appeals of the mirage of Pestel’s revolutionary dictatorship, which sought to bring about change using the very instruments of oppression fashioned by the autocracy it so much despised. For Radzinskii, Lunin is a much more serious threat to the autocracy than Pestel’s mirage. For there is



nothing more threatening to the survival of an authoritarian order than individual free will. The man who proclaims his individual freedom in the face of such a regime becomes a "state criminal." His very will is an imminent threat to such a system, and it must destroy him, lest his example lead others to challenge the master.

Radzinskii depicts this struggle as an uneven battle between a powerful machine and the vulnerable individual, but also credits the man with a powerful weapon against his oppressor. While men can be smashed, erased from the face of the earth, ideas cannot. Such is the theme of Radzinskii's play. One only has to put them on paper and hand them down to generations to come. Alone in his cell, aware of his nearing execution, Radzinskii's Lunin decides to spend his last hours recording the story of his own life and death. For a mystery is revealed to Lunin: "Words spoken take flight, but what is written remains! No sooner are words written, . . . nailed down to a wretched piece of paper," than they become indestructible. Even if the paper is burnt, the words will creep from mouth to mouth, from generation to generation, and each in turn thus becomes a witness of history.

This belief in the power of the written word expressed by Radzinskii through Lunin's monologue resounds in Russian culture. One finds its resonance in numerous proverbs and popular sayings such as "What is written with a pen cannot be hewn with an axe" (Chto napisano perom, togo ne vyrubish toporom). This belief moved the Archpriest Avvakum to record his sufferings as an Old Believer during the seventeenth century. Mikhail Bulgakov expressed the same idea when he told his readers that "manuscripts do not burn." Contemporary *samizdat* in all its forms is but another manifestation of this faith. What is especially interesting, however, is the fact that those in power in Russia, whether tsars or commissars, have shared the same awe before the written word. This accounts for the ever-present tyranny of censorship. Modern Russian and Soviet history are replete with attempts to make such a policy more rational, to tolerate thaws, even to champion some degree of "openness" or "publicity" (*glasnost*) as an alternative. But the written word is serious business and there is always the threat that some words will become unshackled to challenge the system itself.

*Lunin, or the Death of Jacques . . .*, as its title suggests, also presents a comment on the contradictory role of the Enlightenment in Russia. On the one hand, the Enlightenment, which transformed the world view of Western man by infusing it with a faith in rationality,



natural law, and progress, served as the main source of inspiration for the Decembrists. On the other hand, in its Russian context the Enlightenment, with its emphasis upon reason, also served Russian autocrats in their efforts to rationalize their own society. By the 1820s many among the educated gentry, and Lunin in particular, began to question the need for such tutelage, thus signifying the beginning of the process which Nicholas Riasanovsky has termed “the parting of the ways,” and preparing the soil for the birth of the Russian intelligentsia (Riasanovsky 81–100).<sup>8</sup> In Radzinskii’s play, Lunin takes as a model for his “confession” the composition of Monsieur Diderot, *Jacques, the Fatalist and His Master*, only to challenge some of the book’s central statements.

How I love this work! Two men are traveling along a certain highway—the Master and his servant Jacques. They talk about this and that. . . . And, oh, what a terrible road this is, all paved by slavery—and along it multitudes of dogs are strolling. The minister is dog to the sovereign, the clerk is dog to the minister, the wife is dog to her husband, and the husband is dog to his wife. Being born in the country of slaves, I have the right to imagine myself on that road. And it is natural for me, gentlemen, as a loyal subject to take the name of the Servant—Jacques. And the Master. . . . In our country there is only one. And so, a conversation between the Servant, Jacques, and his Master . . . in the presence of witnesses. . . . (Radzinskii 17)<sup>9</sup>

Of course, Lunin is more than a servant questioning his master in the manner of the French *philosophe*. Diderot’s Jacques is a fatalist who believes that everything is predetermined, “is written up yonder.” This certainly includes the master-servant relationship. “As long as Jacques lives, as long as his Master lives, and even after both are dead, people will say—Jacques and his Master” (Diderot 158). Lunin rejects these predetermined roles. He declares, “All these years Master thought that he had Jacques, the Servant. But Jacques always knew that he had no Master. . . . And it was enough, gentlemen, for the Master to meet by chance the eyes of Jacques. Oh! He immediately felt it: there he stands, an Awesome Servant, a Monstrous Servant—a Servant without a Master!” Moreover, in Diderot’s book, the Master indulges in the illusion that “he leads Jacques.” And it might, indeed, appear so, since Jacques, through no fault of his own,

ends up in jail from which his Master has no intention of freeing him. So, too, Nicholas I believes that his cunning game has entrapped Lunin and will bring the man either to submission or to destruction.

In reality, Lunin, the most free man in Russia—freer than Nicholas who is dog to his own sense of duty, has chosen his own fate. He has provoked Nicholas to predictable actions. Each time he had chosen to refuse the easier path of the servant with its enticing offer to save his flesh by compromising his spirit. In 1826 Lunin refused to accept the Grand Duke Constantine's offer to let him disappear quietly from Warsaw to avoid imminent arrest. "He had hoped," says Lunin, "that I would run away. The servant, you know, must run away from the anger of his master." Instead, Lunin accepts the arrest, is returned to St. Petersburg, and then exiled to Siberia.

The full meaning of this choice is only revealed to Lunin in his cell at Akatui on the evening of his own death. This mystery Lunin sums up in three words: "Blood cries out." Only the martyr's blood really counts. "There are times when the only place for the free man is on the cross. In Russia, a successful death is more important than a successful life. With us, death is the elixir of immortality. It was for this reason that Abel called to his brother Cain: 'Kill me!' With my blood they will strengthen my ideas." Here again is a distinctly Russian cultural phenomenon—namely the kenotic impulse. Russia's first two Saints, the Kievan princes Boris and Gleb, were canonized for such a sacrifice in the face of evil. It has been expressed by many members of the Russian intelligentsia. Marina Tsvetaeva has summed up its meaning in her poem "André Chenier" (1918). Written in the bloody days of war and revolution, when the shadow of terror already hung over the Russian land, Tsvetaeva's verse recalled the fate of another poet caught in a reign of terror.

André Chenier mounted the scaffold.  
But I live—and that is a mortal sin.

The poetess concluded that in such times life itself had become a "mortal sin" (Tsvetaeva 30).

Est' vremena, gde solntse smertnyi grekh.  
Ne chelovek, kto v nashi dni zhivet.

In his cell, Lunin continues his struggle, his opposition to

despotism and slavery. Lunin's only weapon is his imagination, his ability to create, to remember, to construct his play. Like Hamlet, who needs the help of traveling players to work his revenge, Lunin requires his imaginary interlocutors. His play is more than memory though. Through it dawns a cognition of that which led to the break from the milieu which had entrapped him and his fellows. The very moment that the sovereign power has chosen to strike at him through its petty agents, Lunin embraces the one called SHE. SHE, or the Woman in Black, is not only the spirit of love freely given and of suffering gladly born, but here Radzinskii has Lunin embrace that proud aristocratic Poland with its "Golden Liberties," which Russian slaves have been able to conquer but not to subdue. She embodies Lunin's Catholicism—faith not as dogma or authority but as an identification with unbending free spirit. SHE is that which drives his imagination and his struggle. Yet this is not a rational or logical process—Radzinskii's Lunin is mad—mad after years on imprisonment and suffering. If he were only to think rationally about his situation, he would understand that struggle makes no sense; it will only shorten his miserable life. But this "madman" moves beyond the rational; he imagines, he creates his own theater in which he can reach out to others. It is in this theater that we learn the story of Lunin's life and how it tragically intertwined with the events of his nation's history. Indeed, while Lunin seeks to encompass the tragedy of human history in the universal formula "Cain—Abel—Caesar," he observes in his own witty style, "Of course, in my life, there has always been a gendarme, in addition to that."

Mikhail Sergeevich insists that imagination is more real than any reality. This world view seems to express Radzinskii's own conviction and gives shape to play's whole dramatic form.<sup>10</sup> This allows for a minimum of actors and props accompanied by a maximum of expressiveness. The playwright does not take Lunin out of his cell and place him respectively into the appropriate settings, i.e., his father's home, the tsar's palace, or the road to Siberia. Instead, scenes and interlocutors are conjured up by the power of Lunin's own imagination to be brought to life in the very darkness of his cell.

Thus, structurally the play develops on two levels: the present reality of events in Akatui that form the actual plot, and the events of the past reconstructed by Lunin's imagination. The plot is minimal. Grigor'ev, the officer in charge of the prison at Akatui, receives an order to have Lunin executed as soon and as discreetly as possible. He

immediately orders the prison scribe to begin writing a deposition on the “sudden death” of the State Criminal Lunin. The report is to be completed by the time of execution. Having scheduled that act for three o’clock in the morning, Grigor’ev goes to Lunin to explain the situation. In exchange for Lunin’s word to render no resistance, Grigor’ev allows him to spend the remaining hours writing letters to friends and relatives. He even volunteers to deliver whatever messages Mikhail Sergeevich might have. Lunin accepts this proposition under the condition that a Polish priest be present at the execution. Lunin explains his whim as a natural wish not to be of the same faith with his murderers. We later learn, however, that in the *pater* Lunin hopes to have a witness of the murder, a witness who will eventually carry the truth of his death to the outside world.

As the door closes behind Grigor’ev, the clock strikes midnight. Lunin realizes that he has only three hours to live and decides “to nail down to paper” a message to his contemporaries and to his posterity. Lunin’s memory brings back scenes from his childhood, youth, and years of maturity, as well as friends and enemies of his past.

The dynamism of this almost plotless drama lies in the tension between the two realities. Seemingly disjointed scenes from the past follow in a chronological order so that we become aware of both historical developments of the period and Lunin’s own part in them. These recreated events, which form his own conscious biography, flow rapidly towards their logical conclusion—Lunin’s death. In the scene of the execution, both realities finally merge. This produces a shock effect. When the murderers walk into Lunin’s cell, the tension between the three hours of “real time” and at least fifty years of Lunin’s life squeezed into these three hours reaches the point of explosion. “Already?” Lunin says with a start. The spectators are startled too, suddenly becoming conscious of the “real time.”

To further reinforce the idea that imagination is more real than any reality Radzinskii resorts to a Dostoevskian device: he endows his hero with many voices. The play is a monodrama, and the stage is dominated by Lunin almost at all times. Yet, Lunin’s speech never becomes a monologue. On the contrary, it is almost entirely dialogized. Mikhail Sergeevich argues, defies, questions, mocks, and anticipates the reactions of his imaginary interlocutors. Thus his speech, charged with intellectual, emotional, and physical energy, approximates a dynamic action. By contrast, the rest of the characters—officer Grigor’ev, the scribe, the peasant woman Martha,

the *pater*, and the two criminals who are to be his executioners—seem no more than phantoms, ghosts. Lunin perceives them as such when they break into his reality, interrupting the flow of his thoughts. What is more, the spectators react in the same manner to these bleak, petty creatures with their vulgar idiom, with their giggling, lust, drunkenness, and careerism. Theirs is a banality of evil, a pettiness born of self-interest even at the expense of another's life. Lunin, mad as he is, caged in his cell, seems to be the only real person in the play. He is metaphorically the only source of light in autocratic Russia—the moment he dies, SHE, the woman in black, finally breaks out of the darkness and puts the candle out. This is the same candle that lit stage at the beginning of the play.

The image created by the candle in the play is part of the central metaphor—the prison itself, the dreadful Akatui, is a metaphor of the whole Russian Empire, to which the very concept of freedom is alien:

VOICES OF THE UNIFORMS: The Tsar! . . . The Tsar has arrived!

LUNIN: What? Here? In prison?

VOICES OF THE UNIFORMS: We are all in prison here!

In this “realm of darkness,” to use Dobroliubov’s term, rows of headless mannequins dressed in glistening embroidered uniforms represent Russian high society, silent and indifferent. The fate of the Decembrists is revealed in a compressed visual image: their military uniforms turn out to be wretched prisoners’ coats on the back, for even in their revolt, the Decembrists remained too much the prisoners of their own “unfree” way of thinking. Lunin alone in his prison cell is the source of enlightenment in the dark empire, just as his candle is the only source of light in the dark cell.

The director of the Moscow production, the late A. Dunaev, seems to have fully understood the central metaphor of the play, and found a felicitous scenic equivalent to it. For this production Dunaev had the interior of the stage covered in black velvet. The white proscenium arch with gilded architectural ornamentation metaphorically represented the exterior grandeur and elegance of the empire with its dark reality visible behind the facade. Dunaev preserved Lunin’s candle and gave it added significance as an element of stage design. The Theater on *Malaia Bronnaia* has neither a curtain nor revolving stage. Light, therefore, becomes especially

important. For this production the director divided the stage into two halves—Lunin's cell and the adjacent room where the scribe composes the deposition. Some episodes take place simultaneously on both halves of the stage, others come in sequence. But in either case, the candle is both an organizing center around which the characters position themselves and a moving source of light which directs the attention of the spectators. When Lunin moves about his cell, the candle's light snatches out of the darkness the necessary props. When he moves away from the audience into the depth of the cell, his back screens the candle. Then the attention of the spectators shifts to the other side of the stage with its brighter light.

Following Radzinskii's principle of maximum expressiveness with minimum means of expression, Dunaev generously uses metonymy—the most economical of all artistic devices. Thus, striped mileposts (*verstovye stolby*) passing rapidly from right to left on a moveable backdrop stand for the *Vladimirskii Trakt*, the road to Siberia traveled by thousands of state criminals to internal exile. Mirrors snatched out of darkness by the light of the candle represent a ballroom. And a gothic window, which for a few minutes becomes visible in the depths of the cell, is an attribute of a Catholic cathedral in Poland.

In spite of all Dunaev's ingenuity with regard to the interpretation of space, light, and metaphor, Radzinskii considers the Moscow production a flop.<sup>11</sup> The author's legitimate concern is Dunaev's failure to convey the tension between two levels of time which is the actual moving force of the play. The director was not able to find an artistic equivalent for real time. The three hours within which the play transpires, Dunaev interpreted literally—his production lasted exactly three hours. This naturalistic element comes into striking conflict with the otherwise thoroughly conventionalized, non-representational style of the production. It also made the play too long and ran the risk of boring the audience.

The director of the New York production, Eve Adamson, was more successful by far in this respect. She managed to compress the production into an hour and a half.<sup>12</sup> Although the play was considerably pruned in the process, the dynamism, the growing suspense, and the explosive denouement were more important to the American audience than all the details that Adamson had cut. The New York audiences had an entirely different background from those in Moscow. Most of them knew little if anything about Russian history.



Therefore, the director chose to omit much that was too specific and would only serve to obscure the play for her audience. Adamson had to generalize and did so successfully. In adapting this play for its American premiere, the director took into account different conventions of theater-going and a very different sense of timing. Americans generally are much less patient than Russians, they want to get to the point as soon as the curtain rises, and consider rapid development of events a major positive quality in a play.

Adamson faced another dilemma in her production. Her theater is extremely small. Like the Theater on *Malaia Bronnaia*, Jacques Cocteau Repertory Theater has neither a curtain nor a revolving stage. In addition, its stage is much smaller than the stage of *Malaia Bronnaia*. In this case Adamson turned the dilemma into an advantage. Her handling of this limited space was more interesting than Dunaev's symmetrical division of the stage. Adamson's composition is vertical rather than horizontal and has three planes rather than two. The stage itself forms the center of the composition. This is Lunin's playing area. The gallery above where technicians usually perform their crafts is in this production given over to the upper part of the composition. Here the director places the Tsar, sitting motionless in the right corner, and the Catholic priest.<sup>13</sup> Finally, the lower part of the composition consists of the very edge of the forestage and the adjacent area below which is separated from the stalls by only a few yards. Here the scribe works on the deposition. His face towards the stage, and his back towards the audience, he sits half in real and half in theatrical space, thus forming a link between "history" and the "witnesses of history" in the auditorium.

Successful in many respects, the New York production had one major flaw. The production lacked the central metaphor, the prison at Akatui as the metaphor for the entire Russian empire, which conveys the play's main idea and, at the same time, holds the production together. Indeed, one of the most essential images which contribute to this central metaphor is a row of headless mannikins dressed in military uniforms. They are the embodiment of the structured, disciplined state, based upon unquestioning obedience which has no place for justice, freedom or personal autonomy. In the New York production Adamson replaced these headless, uniformed figures with parts of naked mannikins strewn chaotically about the stage—a torso here, a head there, an arm extended in one corner, a leg in another. Lit by a ghastly light coming from an unknown source (rather than Lunin's



candle); these human parts create a nightmarish image suggesting Lunin's insanity. This surrealist vision led one reviewer of the Cocteau production to speak of the play as "Theater of Death" (Eckert).

This Kafkaesque quality to the New York production seems to have been a result of the director's intent. In striving to make *Lunin* comprehensible to her audience, she chose to play to their conscious and unconscious associations with twentieth-century totalitarianism.<sup>14</sup> To this end she introduced such props as a typewriter on which the scribe composed the deposition regarding Lunin's death, an electric light bulb in the upper level of the composition, and a record player, which was placed in Lunin's cell! The juxtaposition of the candle and record player produced a jarring ahistorical discontinuity. At the same time, in Adamson's production Lunin's jailers denied him a desk or table on which to write his confession and so he had to lie on the floor near the candle.

While this composition may not have disturbed the American audience, such a modernized prison would not ring true for a Soviet audience with its sense of Lunin's place in Russian history and its practical knowledge of the fine points of a contemporary police state's techniques. From generation to generation the Soviet intelligentsia has passed down the tales of those who fell into the hands of state security since the time of Stalin. They know that Lunin's confession in the form presented by Radzinskii is an impossibility under a totalitarian regime. Lefortovo has no desks in its cells; nor would a prisoner be granted the luxury of paper or pen with which to write. Above all, the competent authorities would deny the prisoner any opportunity to write. Torture, which the Enlightenment labeled an irrational means for gaining testimony, would be used to break the man himself. Against the metaphor of the candle and its promise of enlightening Lunin and Russia stands the modern technology of "enlightenment," used in the form of a naked light bulb to deny a prisoner sleep and to destroy his very sanity. Thus, the essential metaphor of Radzinskii's play—Lunin as the source of enlightenment in an obscurantist Russia likened to the single candle as the source of light in Lunin's dark cell—was lost in Adamson's invocation of surrealist elements, taken from an Orwellian vision of totalitarianism but lacking the very completeness that makes such a system so dehumanizing.

By the same token, the New York production ignored the play's

historical dimensions and so compromised its philosophical meaning. Radzinskii placed his protagonist in an intellectual context which could be understood within its historical context of the first half of the nineteenth century. His Lunin does battle with a distinctly Russian (pre-Soviet) tyranny, i.e., the tsarist autocracy. Here tyranny masquerades as the power which could, through its bureaucratic instruments, transform human society, ensuring the enserfment of the many and the regimentation of the few in the name of the Enlightenment, duty, and the glory of the state. From Radzinskii's treatment of the three sons of Paul I, it is clear that their tyranny is not that of individual arbitrariness or personal whim. It is formidable in its abstractness and enslaves them to their duty as much as it regiments their subjects. It is the power of the official and the bureaucrat unchecked by the rule of law. The roots of this tyranny lie deep in Russian history. Only gradually does Lunin, at first its unwilling servant, then a conscious rebel, and finally an intransigent philosophical opponent, come to comprehend the nature of his own struggle and the dilemma of his nation.

*Lunin, or the Death of Jacques* is the second drama in what Radzinskii has called his "historical-philosophical trilogy." The first of these was *Conversations with Socrates*, written in 1969. The last was *Theater at the Time of Nero and Seneca*, written in 1981. The word "philosophical," as applied by Radzinskii to the description of these plays fits well within the conventional use of this term by the Russian intelligentsia. From the Enlightenment the Russian intelligentsia took the *philosophes'* commitment to the speculative examination of the most pressing human concerns. Such an examination is remote from the formal discourse of modern philosophy as a discipline. In Russia it found its expression in Peter Chaadaev's *Philosophical Letters*, an examination of Russia's place or lack of one in world culture, and is more akin to what Anglo-Saxons would call "intellectual speculation."

*Lunin* can best be understood within the context of the two other plays and their examinations of the relationship between the intellectual and authority. In the essay cited above, Leszek Kolakowski expresses the idea that there have always been two possible roles for the intellectual in society—that of the priest, the upholder of established truth, intellectual systems and dogma, or the jester, the gadfly and critical critic who questions all truths, systems, and dogmas. Radzinskii is well aware of the plight of the intellectual, who may be

forced by circumstance or self-delusion into some compromise between these roles. Since Socrates the dialogue has been one of the most formidable tools of the jester in questioning established authority. In Diderot the dialogue emerged with new vigor as a means of exploring the "dialectical dynamics of thought" (Litwin 5). At the same time, Diderot, the skeptic, persecuted by the *ancien régime* as a gadfly, had served Catherine II and thereby in the name of Enlightenment helped to make Russia's autocracy stronger. In his last years the *philosophe* found a great sympathy for "the noble Seneca," who had tried to combine philosophical speculation with service to his pupil, Nero. Diderot thus provides the link connecting the plays of Radzinskii's trilogy. At one and the same time he was, like Seneca, both jester and priest.

For Radzinskii all his protagonists, i.e., Socrates, Seneca, and Lunin, shared the dilemma of choosing between these paths. Each of the three protagonists confronted a tyranny. For Socrates it was the Athenian *demos*, embittered and shaken by defeat. For Seneca it was the imperial power of a demigod unchecked by Augustan moderation or Republican institutions. In Lunin's case he poses a dire threat to the autocracy, for such a tyranny seeks its legitimacy not in custom or law but in rationality itself and is unchecked by God or man. Each of the protagonists faced the same dilemma of defining his own role in society and his own relationship with the regime. Socrates acknowledges his role as "a gadfly of society." Lunin sees himself as a philosophical and political opponent of the autocracy. "In England he might be a member of the loyal opposition," but Russia, Mother Russia, is not England. Socrates engages in dialogues with his fellow citizens, but Lunin's dialogues, like those of Dostoevsky, are with himself. Both are, however, overtly and consciously jesters, questioning, doubting, and disproving unshakable truths. Both men are products of their societies and both distance themselves from that society in order to sustain their curiosity in seeking the measure of man and his institutions. "Let's investigate . . ." which Radzinskii makes the final words of the dying Socrates is a credo for both characters.

Yet, there is always the path of engagement with its temptations of worldly power and intellectual system building. Diderot and Seneca were both intellectuals who, in spite of their skepticism, succumbed to that call. Obsessed with the idea of preserving the greatness of Rome, Radzinskii's Seneca becomes a priest of the new

regime. He compromises on questions of ethics for *raison d'état*. Gradually he comes to realize that "a philosopher should have no part in this filthy mess," and withdraws from the imperial court, although it means that his capricious and vengeful pupil will turn his full wrath upon him. Having lived as a priest, Seneca dies a jester. His last words are: "Move, Emperor, you've shaded the light from me."

In seeking a synthesis of the interpretations offered by the Moscow and New York productions of *Lunin* we return to those universal ethical questions that stand at the very core of Radzinskii's philosophical-historical trilogy. The banality of power, the paranoia of ideological dogmatists, the fate of the man who refuses to compromise in the face of a system, which will not tolerate any denial of its authority, speak to the human condition. In an interview during his American visit in 1985 Radzinskii pointed the way toward such a synthesis. Commenting on the relationship between the New York and Moscow theater worlds, Radzinskii addressed the general cultural situation as well.

We are not very well acquainted with each other now.  
 . . . We've heard more about you, and you've heard less about us.  
 I hope very much that now will come the time when these relations will change, and the cultures will join and will affect each other. And that will be to the benefit of both our cultures.  
 (Eckert)

## NOTES

1. The historical literature on the Decembrists is vast. The publication of documents and materials relating to the Decembrists began in earnest after their pardon in 1855 and expanded into a torrent following the October Revolution. Of the scholarship devoted to the Decembrist movement I have relied heavily upon the following: Anatole Mazour, *The First Russian Revolution, 1825* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1937); Marc Raeff, *The Decembrist Movement* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1966); and W. Bruce Lincoln, "A Re-Examination of Some Historical Stereotypes: An Analysis of the Career Patterns and Backgrounds of the Decembrists," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 24.3, (1976): 357–

68. Soviet works on the Decembrist Movement, while they provide a wealth of detail, are ideologically conventional in their interpretation. The standard Soviet work remains that of the late M. V. Nechkina, who began studying the movement in the 1920s. See: M. V. Nechkina, *Dvizhenie dekabristov*, two volumes (Moscow: Nauka, 1955). I have consulted three biographic studies of Lunin. The most complete and historically well-rounded work remains that of S. B. Okun', *Dekabrist M.S. Lunin* (Leningrad, 1962). N. Ia. Eidelman, *Lunin* (Moscow: Molodaia Gvardiia, 1970) is the work of a serious young historian aimed at a popular reading public. Glynn Barratt, *M.S. Lunin: Catholic Decembrist* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976) is a flawed study, which fails to place Lunin's pre-1825 career and his existence in exile into a larger historical context. The best work on Nicholas I's reaction to the events of December 14 and the conspirators is W. Bruce Lincoln, *Nicholas I: Emperor and Autocrat of All the Russias* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).

2. Professor Lincoln has made several informed observations on this problem. As he has pointed out in his *Jahrbücher* article (1976) cited above, one of the consequences of this theodicy was the creation and perpetuation of certain stereotypes regarding the Decembrists. At the same time Lincoln has pointed out that historical judgments about Nicholas I, which invariable have pictured him as an obscurantist, martinet, and gendarme of Europe are, in part, a function of the hostile image painted by such members of the intelligentsia as Alexander Herzen in his very popular memoirs, *Byloe i dumy*. For Herzen, Nicholas was always the man who hanged the five Decembrists. See Lincoln, *Nicholas I*, 9–10.

3. The best work on Herzen's attitude towards the Decembrists remains Martin Malia, *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1965), 31–34.

4. Theodicy, a term coined by Leibnitz, refers to a system of philosophical optimism in which all events are seen as part of the unfolding of Divine plan, making this "the best of all possible worlds." In 1755 Voltaire delivered the first blow against such a system in his poem "The Lisbon Earthquake." Later he satirized Leibnitz' theodicy in his novel *Candide*. There followed a running dispute between Voltaire and Rousseau over the question of theodicy and the place of human happiness in such a system. Diderot, the determinist, sided with Voltaire, the Deist, on this issue. Secular theodicy found its most conspicuous expression in Marxism's dedication to progress, which equated the latter with human happiness. This secular form can be found in Bertolt Brecht's "Writing the Truth: Five Difficulties." There the playwright employs a metaphor, drawing on another earthquake—this time in Yokohama. Brecht notes that American magazines ran photographs of the destruction with the caption, "Steel Stood." Here is human progress. In human events it is enough to expose the sources of war and exploitation and thus clear the ground for better construction. The materials and their immediate fate do not matter. What of ethics and morality? Are they no more than

historically-conditioned praxis to be judged by their contribution to some final end against which immediate human suffering has no claim? In Radzinskii's *Lunin* we see an approach strikingly similar to Kant's denial of eudemonism as a basis for ethics. As Ernst Cassirer has pointed out, Kant concluded that the diminution of happiness can not lessen the value of existence: "Our deeds, not our outward fate, give life its meaning." See Ernst Cassirer, *Rousseau, Kant and Goethe: Two Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1945), 35-43.

5. Lunin's letters from Siberia, directed as they were against the autocracy and serfdom, also reveal a process of "criticism and self-criticism." As he points out, in England he would have been a member of the "loyal opposition." But in Russia such a phrase was a contradiction in and of itself. Under autocracy loyal subjects did not oppose, and those who opposed could not be loyal. Under such circumstances the jester was a dangerous man. On this very point Lunin wrote: "In England they would say: 'Lunin is a member of the opposition. . . . My only weapon is thought, at times in harmony, at times in opposition with the government's course . . . opposition is characteristic of every political order.'"

6. On the circumstances surrounding Lunin's death in Akatui see A. Craplicki, "Smierc Lunina," *Pamiętniki dekabrystów* (Warsaw, 1960), 3, 284-85; S. B. Okun', *Dekabrist M.S. Lunin*; F. G. Tol', "Tetradka," *Dekabristy na poselenii: Iz arkhiva Iakushinykh* (Moscow, 1920), 128-30; and *Sovetskaia istoricheskaia entsiklopediia* (Moscow: Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia, 1965), 8, 818.

7. For a discussion of the ethical and philosophical ramifications of the roles of jester and priest for the intellectual see Leszek Kolakowski, "The Priest and the Jester," which first appeared in 1959 and was republished in Maria Kunciewicz, ed., *The Modern Polish Mind* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1962), 301-27. Kolakowski, a philosopher of international reputation and a critic of Marxism-Leninism, has argued that "there is no reason to treat morality as the tool of history, in the sense of being obliged to seek criteria of moral good or bad in the realization of general historical progress." See "Conscience and Social Progress," in Leszek Kolakowski, *Towards a Marxist Humanism: Essays on the Left* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 134. In his masterful history of Marxism he argues that the ideology in power has ossified into a dogma, "a frozen and immobilized . . . superstructure of a totalitarian political movement, which may rationalize existing arrangements but has no compelling claim on human reason because it has lost touch with intellectual developments and social realities." See Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism* 3 volumes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 3, 529.

8. On those conditions in Russian life which contributed to the gradual alienation of the gentry from the autocratic service state see Marc Raeff, *Origins of the Russian Intelligentsia: The Eighteenth-Century Nobility* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966).



9. "The original, as well as the translation contain a direct quotation from Denis Diderot's philosophical novel with its consideration of freedom and determinism. See Denis Diderot, *Jacques, the Fatalist, and His Master* translated by J. Robert Loy (New York: New York University Press, 1959), 184. The two editions of *Lunin* published in the Soviet Union, i.e., that in the journal *Teatr* No. 6, (June 1982) and the one in a collection of Radzinskii's plays, which appeared under the title, *Besedy s Sokratom* (Moscow: Sovetskii Pisatel', 1982), delete this quotation and its reference to "the country of slaves." The connection between Diderot's philosophical novel and Russia is a particularly strong one. The *philosophe* conceived and worked over *Jacques* during his visit to Russia in 1773–1774 as a guest of Catherine the Great. On her relationship with the *philosophes*, one should recall the satirical verse of A. K. Tolstoi:

"Madame, under you one marvels.  
How order has blossomed."  
Wrote her politely,  
Voltaire and Diderot.

"Now it is only proper to give  
The people to whom you are mother  
Their freedom quickly.  
Quickly give them freedom."

"Messieurs, I must object.  
vous me complex," said she.  
And then by ukaz enserfed  
The Ukrainians to the land.

A. K. Tolstoi, "Istoriia gosudarstva Rossiiskogo ot gostomysla do Timasheva," *Sobranie sochinenii* 4 volumes (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Khudozhestvennoi Literatury, 1963), I, 396.

10. Radzinskii expressed this same idea in a letter to the author when speaking about how he had become a dramatist. Training to be an historian-archivist, one day while doing research he came across the papers relating to an eighteenth-century Russian traveler, Gerasim Lebedev. An adventurer and "Don Quixote," Lebedev went to India as a merchant but founded the first permanent theater in Calcutta. Radzinskii, the historian, felt a strange kinship with this countryman who managed to be a run-away serf and an "admirer of the Enlightenment." Traveling to the fabled East where fortunes were to be made, Lebedev poured the money that he made in the service of the East India Company into his theater, returning to Russia a pauper. Feeling a "mystical" link with this traveler and his theater, Radzinskii deserted the historical



narrative and chose to tell his story as drama. Thus, his first play, *India, My Dream* . . . (1958), came to be written. The play, complete with long monologues in the lofty style of the eighteenth century, was produced by the Moscow Theater of Young Spectators and was a dismal failure. But Radzinskii had already contracted that "amazing theatrical illness, which afflicts all who have been the least bit in contact with the theater. I could not live without that illusionary world of painted clouds and cardboard trees, of fake tears and exaggerated suffering. Well, there it is. Imagination is more real than reality." Letter to Maia A. Kipp (February 4, 1981)/1-2.

11. In my interview with Radzinskii on September 6, 1985, during his visit to New York in conjunction with the premiere of *Lunin* at the Cocteau Repertory Theater I asked him about his perception of the Moscow production. Radzinskii replied that in spite of many interesting features it had been a "flop." This he attributed, in part, to the length of the production, noting that he thought Dunaev had been too realistic in this question of time. "I think he took my three hours literally, because his production lasted exactly three hours."

12. The playwright willingly accepted all the cuts that had been made. In general, he seems to be tolerant of and receptive to the ideas of those trying to adapt his plays to the conventions of their own theaters and audiences. Radzinskii found Eve Adamson "a talented and knowledgeable director." While impressed with her professional skills, he was troubled by her eclecticism. He observed: "Sometimes she gets carried away a little and throws things into the same pile (valit vse v odnu kучu) which do not belong together, but, in general, I am impressed." He did, however, object at the dress rehearsal to one glaring ahistorical element: a record player in Lunin's cell.

13. Such a composition recalls the conceptual principal of an Orthodox *ikonostas*, or screen of icons (sacred images), which separates the sanctuary from the rest of the church. Collectively the icons provide a pictorial theology for the faithful. In medieval Russia icons were called "books for those who cannot read." Metaphorically, Adamson's location of the tsar parallels the Russian folk perception of the relationship between man, his earthly master and God. (Do Boga vysoko, do tsaria daleko.) On icons as pictorial theology see: K. Kornilovich, *Okno v minuvshnee* (Leningrad: Iskustvo, 1968), 41-57.

14. Eve Adamson's "modernization" of the play finds some support among scholars, who have addressed the play. Bela Kiralyfalvi has argued that the play is an exercise in Aesopian language for which the Russian intelligentsia is so famous. That is, Radzinskii's *Lunin* is a drama about the dilemmas of Soviet dissidents, using a codified language which the censors do not understand or ignore, but the theater-going public translates with ease. The argument turns on certain "parallels" and whether they are a function of the Soviet audience's immediate consciousness of current events or a more general historical conditioning. See Bela Kiralyfalvi, "Critical Voices in Soviet Drama of the Seventies," *Theater Perspectives No. 2: Contemporary Russian and*

*Polish Drama*, 18–19. The issue is, as Eric Bentley has observed, that all historical plays are about the playwright's own time. But the mediation between the playwright's understanding of his own time and the choice of an historical subject is not so determined as Kiralyfalvi suggests. His audiences are free to draw their own connections. The staging of a play and the decision to invest specific content into the drama, which violates the author's specific historical setting, risks the destruction of the very mediation that the author has tried to create. The distinction is between a director's understanding of the connection between Brecht's *Galileo II* and the bombing of Hiroshima and his deliberate decision to make the setting for that play the Los Alamos of Robert Oppenheimer. See Eric Bentley, "The Science Fiction of Bertolt Brecht," in Bertolt Brecht, *Galileo*, translated by Charles Laughton (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 9–25.

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